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MX little more than a doubtful chip: Aspin

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A Pentagon contention that "slave labor" enables the communist Warsaw Pact to build more weapons than NATO for less money was dismissed as far-fetched yesterday by the new chairman of the House Armed Services Committee.

Rep. Les Aspin, D-Wis., also said a new Pentagon program for "superhardening" missile silos does not persuade him that the controversial MX missile is more than a doubtful bargaining chip in the nuclear arms talks. His support is considered vital to continued MX production, which will be voted on in March.

He made the comments in his first interview since being elected chairman of the powerful committee last month, defeating several members senior to him.

In his testimony to the committee, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger said that the apparent ability of the communist Warsaw Pact to produce more weapons for less money can be explained by "slave labor."

Manpower costs only take up 9 or 10 percent of the Soviet defense budget compared to 42 percent of the U.S. defense budget, Mr. Weinberger said.

However, following the hearing, Mr. Aspin said "that can't be the explanation" because CIA estimates showing NATO spends more on defense use U.S. labor rates in calculating the comparable weapons spending figures. "You just can't dismiss it by their wage rates," he said.

"So, the question is what is the explanation? And that's not clear yet . . . There are a couple of possibilities. One is that they've wasted the money — NATO is not as efficient," the chairman said.

He also said it is possible that the equipment the communist pact is building in larger numbers is not as high in quality as the weapons being built by the United States and its allies.

Defense Secretary Weinberger warned that the Soviets are producing three times as many submarines as the United States, two times as many tactical fighter aircraft and four times as many tanks.

Mr. Aspin was a Pentagon official in the Johnson administration and served notice in his questioning that he will be using that expertise in his current role as committee chairman.

The new chairman has given qualified support to the 10-warhead MX missile on the grounds that it has been needed in the nuclear arms talks as a bargaining chip. His support paved the way for tentative approval by the House last May.

Another senior committee member, Rep. Charles Bennett, D-Fla., asked the defense secretary why Congress should support the MX when Mr. Weinberger said in 1981 that placing it in concrete silos would make it vulnerable to a knock-out first strike by large Soviet ICBMs.

Partly because of political opposition from states in the American west to an earlier proposal for mobile MX launchers, the decision was made to place the MXs in silos.

Mr. Weinberger replied that since then "American science" has developed new techniques for superhardening the silos and making the missiles less vulnerable to an attack.

Asked to comment, Mr. Aspin said "superhardening is helpful," but with the highly accuracy Soviet missiles "you can overcome superhardening with just a larger warhead. . . . I don't think it eliminates the problem that the missiles are vulnerable."

Asked if he thought the MX was more than just a bargaining chip, the chairman replied "yes, marginally," in that any MXs surviving an attack would carry 10 warheads each compared to three in the current force of Minuteman III missiles.

The chairman also said the new format of the nuclear arms talks — three interrelated talks involving

intercontinental strategic missiles, intermediate-range missiles and defensive and space weapons — has raised questions in his mind about its value as a bargaining chip.

The Soviets have said agreement on one must await agreement on all, while the United States has said progress in one set must not be held up by lack of progress in another.

The Soviets with their lead in large land-based ICBMs, Mr. Aspin noted, are concerned more about American technical prowess in research on the "star wars" space-based defense system. "So the question is, do you still need the MX as a bargaining chip?"

Defense Secretary Weinberger reaffirmed his belief that the missile is more than a bargaining chip, but said its defeat in Congress would inflict "a damaging blow" to America's position in the nuclear arms talks.

The Pentagon is seeking \$4 billion in the new 1986 budget for 48 MX missiles. Congress is scheduled to vote on final approval for 21 of the missiles in the 1985 budget in March or April.